DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 444 138 CS 014 084

AUTHOR	Comber, Barbara
TITLE	"Coming, Ready or Not!": Changing What Counts as Early Literacy.
PUB DATE	1998-01-16
NOTE	27p.; Paper presented at the Seventh Australia and New Zealand Conference on the First Years of School, the Australian National University (Canberra, Australia, January 13-16, 1998).
AVAILABLE FROM	For full text: http://www.schools.ash.org.au/litweb/barb2.html.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC02 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	Classroom Observation Techniques; *Disadvantaged Youth; *Diversity (Student); *Emergent Literacy; *Learning Readiness; Naturalistic Observation; Preschool Education; *School Readiness
IDENTIFIERS	Cultural Capital; *Kidwatching; Social Justice

ABSTRACT

This paper contends that, historically and today, "readiness" functions as a key symbol in discourses of early childhood. Schools and teachers need to make "ready" for different children in a very different world than that in which many people grew up. The interest in the paper, however, is not only in individual difference but in the kinds of differences in children's linguistic, social, economic, and cultural capital, in what capital different children "bring to school" and are able to use in schools, and in how this affects what they take up from what schools make available. Although the main focus is literacy, the paper uses examples which also touch on numeracy and technology. It is in the tradition of "kid (and teacher) watching," as there is much to be learned from being in classrooms. It is organized in three parts: first, two children are introduced and followed through a morning in the last months of their preschool lives, raising questions about what might await them in school; then a number of classrooms and events where teachers have consciously constructed a "permeable curriculum" are examined; and finally, the two children are looked at again to see what they are making of school and what it is making of them. The paper argues that early childhood curricula and pedagogical practices need to be informed by a commitment to social justice for socioeconomically disadvantaged and culturally diverse communities of children who are present at school, "ready or not." (Contains 22 references.) (NKA)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
☐ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

B. Comber

ED 444 138

'Coming, ready or not!': Changing what counts as early literacy

Keynote Address
Jan 16, 1998

Barbara Comber
Language and Literacy Research Centre
University of South Australia
Holbrooks Road
Underdale, 5032
barbara.comber@unisa.edu.au

Keynote address to the Seventh Australia and New Zealand Conference on the First Years of School, New Approaches to Old Puzzles - Reconceptualising the Early Years of School, The Australian National University, Canberra, 13-16 January

'Coming ready or not!' Now there's a familiar refrain from our own early childhood days. It brings to mind long summers where the kids were banished to 'play outside' sometimes in bare shadeless backyards where hiding spots were at a premium. I begin with this refrain to invoke those memories and also to remind those of us on our summer breaks of the sounds of children which will greet us in just a few weeks. Playful, crying, laughing, squealing, shouting sounds - sounds of energy…But let me return to 'coming ready or not' and its use in my talk this morning.

Historically, and I would argue today, 'readiness' functions a key symbol in discourses of early childhood. The extent to which children are ready for school, ready to read implies one of the major contradictions with education. On the one hand, schools are readiness/training/preparation institutions par excellence - 'nurseries of the population' (Foucault, cited by Smart 1983, p.93) wherein, children

CS 014 084

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

are made into students and would-be citizens - and on the other hand, paradoxically, there is a sense in which children must be made ready for their institutional life, presumably by their families, with the preschool (or kindergarten) functioning as a transitional institution. Much research and scholarship over this century has gone into producing developmental grids by which children's readiness, across social, physical, psychological and educational criteria can be assessed. Indeed, increasingly there are moves to produce baseline data on preschoolers' and school beginners' literacy and numeracy. The belief seems to be that the more we know (read 'assess') the better the pedagogical match. However, an inevitable side-effect of the production of grids of so-called 'normal' development, is the eliciting of failure, deviance and abnormality - the always forever 'unready'.

However my object this morning is to take 'a new approach to an old puzzle', to make the case that schools and teachers need to make 'ready' for children, for different children in a very different world than that in which many of us grew up, to make ready for difference. And I'm very much aware that in taking this position that I am speaking to the group of educators who perhaps best understand and respond to difference, in that children come to you 'unschooled' and therefore perhaps more likely to make their differences all to visible. However my interest is not only in individual difference, but in the kinds of differences in children's linguistic, social, economic and cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1991; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990) and what capital different children are able to use in schools and how this impacts on what they take up from what schools make available. So to begin…

As we approach the new millennium, a media-sustained sense of urgency and anxiety pervades much of everyday life. Uncertainties surrounding educational institutions, the environment, work, family life, health and so on, have an impact on policies and programs for children. These uncertainties raise many questions for early childhood teachers and parents. What do five-yearolds need to know as they begin school in the least years of the millennium? Are these children really so different from the children of the past and if so how and with what implications for teaching? What do different children bring to school and what difference does it make? What do different teachers bring to school and what difference does it make? To what extent can or should early childhood educators work against or with the disciplinary regimes of conservative and managerialist governments? And to what extent do literacy, numeracy, technocy need to be reconceptualised for early childhood classrooms as new sites for work, pleasure, play and/or learning at this time?

The recent governmental focus on literacy in the early years of schooling and related programs of assessment and intervention position early childhood educators in contradictory ways. On the one hand, it's significant that the pivotal role of early childhood education is being recognised. On the other, early childhood education is precariously placed in that compulsory mass assessment threatens to subject teachers and children to new forms of intensified scrutiny. The coincidence of raised status and raised accountability should not go without notice. Phil Cormack and I recently conducted an analysis of curriculum documents produced for early years literacy teachers in South Australia since the sixties till the mid-nineties (Cormack & Comber 1996). Amongst other things there was a notable absence of 'pleasure' in the nineties document. A key word through the sixties, seventies and eighties it was virtually absent in 1995 and in fact an overwhelming anxiety about literacy development and early childhood was noted. Here I discuss these and a number of related issues by considering the experiences of children and their teachers in early childhood classrooms. I make a case for maintaining the space and time for critical and pleasurable literacies from the start of schooling. I draw on a number of recent ethnographic case studies of teachers' work and children's learning in socio-economically diverse and disadvantaged communities.

This paper is concerned with what different children 'bring to school', with what works for or against them; and also with what schools make available and how different children take up such opportunities. Although my main focus is literacy, I will deliberately use examples which also touch on numeracy and technocy. This paper is in the tradition of 'kid (and teacher) watching' as I believe there is much to be learnt from being in classrooms. In selecting instances of classroom practice I have consciously included events which illustrate powerful connections between children's worlds and the worlds of school learning and also events which indicate disconnections. Through examining how children's knowledges and practices count in school life (or not), we can design workable responsive and inclusive curricula. At the same time further examination of the pedagogical practices of highly effective early childhood teachers has much to offer as we reconceptualise curricula and reinvent pedagogies for new times.

This paper is 'peopled' with children and their teachers and is largely a series of classroom narratives followed by brief analyses. It is organised in three parts. Firstly, I introduce two children, Tessa and Alan, and follow each of them through a morning in the last months of their preschool lives. I then raise questions about what might await them in school and invite you to make some predictions. Secondly, I move

across a number of classrooms and events where teachers have consciously constructed a 'permeable curriculum', informed by children's 'funds of knowledge' and repertoires of social and communicative practices. Thirdly and finally, I return briefly to Tessa and Alan to see what they're making of school and what it's making of them. I argue that early childhood curricula and pedagogical practices need to be informed by a commitment to social justice for socio-economically disadvantaged and culturally diverse communities of children, who present at school, ready or not.

Preschool participative repertoires: Ready for what?

Let me turn briefly to fragments of the preschool-school transition stories of two children, Tessa and Alan, in the last weeks of their preschool lives. In this research project we were interested in the connections between children's prior to school experiences and the development of literacy in their first year of school. My purpose here however is not to detail the research but to suggest that much can be learned when educators open their minds to the everyday events in which we are immersed and sometimes feel submerged. Back to the children, both almost-five yearolds are growing up in a highly multicultural socio-economically diverse inner suburb of Adelaide. In this project, our interest is in what children brought to school from preschool, home and community experiences and how teachers might build on those knowledges, skills and experiences in helping children make the transition to school and school literacy learning. So our questions related to the kinds of literate practices which are available to different children in their preschool lives and how they take these up. Now you may well ask hasn't that research been done before? Don't we already know the answers? Not exactly. Not here. Not at this time. Not with these children.

Tessa lives with her mother, father, one older and one younger brother. Her parents were born in Adelaide. Both mother's and father's parents are from Greece. English is spoken in Tessa's home and Greek at her grandparents' homes and on family occasions. By way of introduction, some words from Tessa's mother, Anna.

As you can see we've got lots of books in the house and she's got her little collection in her room. She started...she wanted her collection because my older son's got his collection, so she's got a little collection of books and every night she wants a story read. …See I buy the books so it's really what I like. It seems like it. I bought her the fairy books, like (…inaudible authors' name…) books. She's got a lot of those. And teddy bear books.

But don't jump to any comfortable conclusions. Anna continues!

I suppose it's really funny 'cause they're sort of quite stereotyped really, but she'll read all sorts of books. Where's Wally? She likes that. You know that's an activity thing to find Wally and his dog and whatever. But yeah that's funny 'cause that's what I'm doing. See I'm getting those cute type books for her but she'll read anything. She borrows, you know they go to the library Mondays from kindy and she'll borrow a book and I think they let them choose their own and she brings all sorts of things. Actually I've noticed she brings books with animals. One was the 'Very Hungry Tiger' and another one was something about crocodiles....she can do whatever she wants. We don't really restrict her. I don't know if you...my walls are drawn on. She's started drawing on my walls and writing. Actually in her room she's got a picture of a little house on the wall and a sun and so she's started drawing on walls. My eldest son didn't bother and now my little one is because he saw sister doing it. She's stopped now, but yeah. So just you know - drawing, writing- that's her...

But don't be fooled Tessa is not the studious quiet girl!

My husband's very into, in soccer and she loves that and she will kick a ball outside with him. …Well she plays a lot. She likes playing with her father, you know like jumping around, punching and that sort of thing. There's a lot of physical contact, she likes that.

So it's complicated. Children are complicated. Children's family lives are complicated, more so than suggested by the abstract term 'family background' (see Comber, 1997 for a discussion of use of the term 'background' in educational discourses). As Tessa's mother talks about her daughter we see that Tessa represents no generic girl; that her interests and preferred ways of being in the world are multiplicitous and challenge any predictable static subjectivity. There is no point in kid watching, a major tradition of early childhood educators, unless we are open to the surprises and complexities it generates. So let's see Tessa in action. Let's make her walk and talk across the preschool stage! We see Tessa at the computer and in the outside play house, both as we shall see powerful sites for pleasure, play and work whilst simultaneously incorporating forms of literate, numerate and technological activity .

Using the Computer

On this occasion at the beginning of the preschool session, Tessa and Sophie are drawing on the Mac Classics with Mac Pic. An excerpt from the field notes indicates Tessa's approach.

Tessa draws with a block shape. She draws a dog face and then colours it in. It's P (…inaudible…). I got a video of it. It's for my birthday. At the next computer, Sophie types a string of letters. Tessa makes the whole screen black. Sophie goes back to drawing a face using a variety of tools. They check out what each other is doing and the effects which are produced on the screen. Then Tessa begins to verbalise as she draws and writes.

Tessa: Now I've got white. White eyebrow. A black person. It's a black face. Now I can rub it out. Like magic [smiling as she deletes] I can write my name on this. I need to make it bigger. Now I'm ready to type. [Tessa appears very aware of the researcher's gaze and appears to give a running commentary for her benefit.]

She types: TEESSA. She plays at typing fast and deletes what she has done, perhaps noting the extra 'E' and 'S'.

She types: TESSA. HARRY KOSTA GORGE

Tessa: [Now speaking directly to the watching researcher] I was gonna write my brother's name, KOSTA - a little brother. He was in my mummy's tummy.

She types: GORGE [She makes her writing shake - using Q key]

Tessa: It's not letting me paint now. [She has chosen a rub out brush and removes all her words. She uses the menu to choose her options.]

Tessa: I'm gonna type my name again. 'T'- [types T], 'E' [types E], 'S' [types S], 'S' [types S], 'A' [types A]. 'Tessa'.

She knows how to delete letters using backspacing and Macpics. She chooses an

open square and moves chunks of letters around and jumbles them. Then, she erases the whole lot. She comments quietly to herself as she goes. 'I…what what'll happen if I…' ...She knows how to cancel and rub out. She works out that the 'arrow' key rubs out. After rewriting her family's names again, Tessa gets up and moves outside to another activity.

During this observation in the preschool, Tessa makes visible some of her competencies with literacy. She independently uses the computer to draw and also to write her own name and the names of family members. She knows how to spell out the words she knows and can identify the letters she needs on the keyboard. She knows how to make a space between words. She is happy to have an audience and volunteers ongoing descriptions of her thinking and activity. What does Tessa do that might work for (or against her) in the school context? But first let's follow Tessa into another site.

In the outside playhouse

Later that morning Tessa has another opportunity to participate in literacy-related play with the support of one of the preschool teachers, Vicki. When the excerpt begins Tessa is with her friends Sophie, Julie and Leah in an outside wooden construction that is set up like a home without walls. It has two old telephones, a computer keyboard, a cupboard and an oven. Vicki brings pots, baking tins and bowls from the storage shed.

Tessa: Mum can I play outside?

Julie: Yes you can play outside.

Tessa: I'll make a cake.

Julie: You better be careful OK. You better be careful OK. [Tessa brings her sand cake back into the structure and tells a boy who has arrived in the areas that he cannot play. He moves away. Soon after Vicki one of the preschool teachers, stops them using sand in this area.]

Vicki: You can use bark chips, but sand stays in the sand pit. [Tessa keeps playing while Vicki talks. She role plays plugging in the phone.]

Tessa: We gotta put the wires in somewhere. [Tessa role plays the phone ringing then answers the phone. My house is going to be on fire. [As an explanatory aside to

Vicki.]

Vicki: Who is in your house?

Tessa: Me, Sophie and Julie.

Vicki: How did the fire start?

Tessa [...inaudible...]

Vicki: What are you going to do?

Tessa: Ring the firemen.

Vicki: (... inaudible...) [Talks through with Tessa what she would have to do.] The emergency number is 000. The address is...

Tessa: [Interjecting] Doesn't matter!

Vicki: Yes it does!

Tessa: What's an address?

Vicki: The number, the street, the suburb.

Tessa: 50, Georgiefire Street

Vicki: I'll get some paper so you can make a sign.

Tessa: It's just pretend.

Vicki: I know. [Vicki goes to get paper to write a sign.]

Tessa: Emergency, emergency, 15 Georgie Fire street. Ee-au-ee-au [makes fire engine noise. The other girls continue to get grass and bark for the cakes.]

Tessa: I rang the fire brigade.

Robyn: I'll put it out for you 'cos I'm the captain. [Robyn pretends to put it out.]

Tessa: We don't have a hose. [Tessa roleplays distressed citizen using the phone] We have a fire. [pause] 15 George Street Fire Street. [Tessa then roleplays the person answering at the fire brigade] Hello. You want me to come over your house. [pause] Knock, knock. [Vicki returns with the paper and a box of markers for making the sign.]

Vicki: How do we write 50?

Tessa: 5

Vicki: You do it. [Tessa writes 5 and Vicki tells her the 0. Vicki spells out

Georgie Fire Street. She calls out the letters and Tessa writes each one.] When we do streets we don't do the whole word ...[Explains that the abbreviation for Street is St]. Now we better write Riverside. [Calls out the letters one by one. Vicki tapes the sign to the door.] So the fire brigade can find the house.

Tessa has written in block letters: 50 GEORGIE FIRE ST

RIVERSIDE .

The '5', 'G' and 'R' are reversed on the first line, but very neatly written. The word Riverside is written completely upside down except for the last two letters. The letters themselves are perfectly formed.

A number of observations can be made about this episode in terms of Tessa's literacy development and the opportunities which are made available to her in this preschool situation for language and literacy learning. Tessa enjoys high status amongst her peers (and teachers) and knows how to initiate, manage and direct the role-playing game. Within the space of a few minutes she changes the cake-making scenario. Perhaps picking up on Julie's warnings to be careful when baking, she creates a more exciting scenario - the fire. She involves Vicki in co-constructing the situation and in so doing receives specific pedagogical feedback tailored to her needs. Vicki takes the role-play as an opportunity for teaching and rehearses with Tessa the key information for ringing the fire brigade. When Vicki becomes involved and the 'game' is appropriated for pedagogical ends, the other children peel off - back to 'cake-baking'.

Tessa at first rejects the pedagogical intervention, with her retort that the address 'doesn't matter'. There is a tension between Vicki's need to scaffold and extend and Tessa's need to play. Suddenly however, Tessa takes up her teacher's offers of involvement and information when she interrupts to ask about the word 'address'. Tessa spontaneously produces an imaginary address with all the components the teacher has asked for. When the teacher responds again by offering to get paper to make the sign, Tessa reminds her that, 'It's just pretend'.

This exchange represents a prototypical pedagogical situation in the preschool context, in that the teacher explicitly extends the play, language and knowledge base of the child at play. The teacher's job is to closely observe and capitalise on pedagogical opportunities which arise in the context of the child's play (Tyler, 1993; Walkerdine, 1984). Tessa's agenda has been to increase the excitement of the role-play. However what her observant teacher hears is an opportunity for teaching in context and to extend the scenario into literacy-related play. The teacher enters the role-play as a questioner: Who is in your house? How did the fire start? What are you going to do? After some initial resistance Tessa, whose own purposes have been overtaken in the teacher's reconstitution of the game as a simulation of a 'real' emergency situation, accepts Vicki's advice and 'invitation' to write the sign. Satisfied with this outcome, Vicki then supports the girls to continue with their role play by providing red strips of material for the fire.

Now much more could be said about this episode. We could look at it in terms of scaffolding, teaching points, the different worlds of Vicki and Tessa, but here I want to raise just a few questions about this and other events involving Tessa in the preschool and particularly through considering Tessa's experience in comparison with other peers which may be useful to consider in regard to other groups of children. These include:

- What kinds of pedagogical responses does Tessa elicit?
- How is she able to do this?
- What opportunities for literacy learning does this provide for her?
- How might this differ for other children in her preschool cohort?

Witnessing Tessa's facility to elicit tailored pedagogical responses made me hypersensitive to other children in the preschool context. I began to realise it is not only what children know that makes a difference to how they are seen in educational institutions but how what they know and can already do affects what they are able to access and initiate. Tessa's ability and tolerance of displaying the right kind of responsive studentship is crucial to her preschool success (see also Baker & Freebody 1993).

And so to Alan. Once again I will let his mother's words function as introduction.

His strengths would be...Oh gee! He's got a few. His coordination is fantastic. Give him a ball and that's it. But I don't know how he's going to go with concentration.

He's like a jack in the box. So I don't know.

Sound familiar, but again don't be fooled! Let's eavesdrop on a conversation between Alan's mother, Carol and his new teacher-to-be, Margie in the weeks before Alan begins school. Consider how Alan's ways of operating (as told by his mother) might work for or against him in school situations.

He doesn't like recognition and so they did an assessment last year on Alan and they said oh he doesn't know how to do a circle and he doesn't know how to do these shapes. There was a full form and I said, 'Yes he does. I said, This is the picture he brought home'. Yes I've got it. And I took it to them and they took a photocopy of it. There was this circle and there was this triangle. But he just didn't want them to see it.

Margie: Why do you think that is?

Carol: I don't know. He just doesn't like recognition for it. He was told to draw his best friend. He said, 'I can't do that and he wouldn't do it'. Yet there was a picture in his bag. And I said, 'What is that?'. He said, 'That's Jean'. So as long as you don't make a fuss of him he's fine. Hopefully this will change 'cos Leah's very outgoing. Do you know Leah at all?

Margie: Just vaguely, I haven't had a lot to do with her directly.

Carol: She's very outgoing and I'm hoping a little will rub off with Alan. He just doesn't like that idea of people knowing what he can do.

Margie: That's interesting.

Carol: So I don't know. This is what I've given...he was really angry they got this. He said, 'That's mine, they shouldn't take it'. I don't [know] whether he actually was asked if they could they keep it.

Carol makes a number of analytical comments about her son that have a bearing on the way institutions such as preschools and schools reformulate literacy practices and suggests that these reformulations are already problematic for Alan. Drawing and writing must be produced on demand. They are produced as evidence of what the child knows and can do. They belong to the institution as much as the child (as part of accountability trail of diagnosed students and research artefacts!). But my point here is to simply suggest that, in contrast to Tessa, Alan's preferred ways of operating, in particular, his difficulty with performance as public display (on demand) may present him, and his teacher Margie, with difficulties in school. But

let's make Alan walk and talk, and jump and climb!

Up the tree

Alan: [Playing on his own on mini stilts. Another boy joins him and they run away. They find the bats and balls and start to play with those. Alan jumps on the mini trampoline. Runs off.]

Alan: I bet you cannot catch me. Get in the swing - the big fat swing.

[The boys swing in silence at first and then chat too quietly to be heard. Alan somersaults out of the tire swing. Then goes back on his stomach. They wind the swing higher and higher so they spin in a fast circle.]

Alan: Tell Me when I'm nearly finished. [He untwists a little, then climbs the support pole while twisted in the swing. He let's go of the pole and squeals as he untwists. Then twists again.]

Alan: Am I nearly finished? Am I finished yet? Want me to do it with your swing? I Wah hoo! Bang, Bang, Bang. Go up into the tree!

Nick: Come in the space ship. In the spaceship is a koala.

Alan: No a monkey.

Nick: We're spacemen. [They make monkey noises.]

Alan: Oh my God. [Alan swings on the branch, makes animal noises and drops off the branch. Then he climbs the tree again. He talks quietly with Nick and they make animal noises. Alan knocks off Nick's hat.

Nick: Heh that's my hat. You go down and get it.

Alan: No you. [But Alan goes down, throws the hat back up and climbs up again] In the tree. This is where we sleep. [Makes high pitched animal noises. Alan swings on the branch, hangs upside down; talks in animal noises, jumps down and goes up the tree again.

Alan: Now wait for the Monkey. He visits the small house. (…inaudible…) No-one home. Smack, smack your bottom.

Heh this is for you to eat. (…inaudible…) I ate it. Now we're the koalas. You need to

sit somewhere. Get in. That's the ticket. This is where I'll put it. [They're both perched in the tree branches. They make squeals and cries.] Don't be afraid of heights. Have you seen Ghostbusters? At the end this green ghost goes 'Ah the end'. Go up 'cos you want to get to your house. Now we're in the zoo. 'Cos people taked us away.

Nick: They are naughty.

Alan: Heh you idiots.

Nick: Stop it. I want to get down. [He cries] Tricked you.

Alan: Throws down the ticket. Heh you idiot come down here. You stay. I want to get home.

Nick: I want to get home.

Alan: Heh spaceman help me. [Nick gets his foot stuck and researcher helps him get down.] Vicki calls the children to get ready to come inside. Those children who have taken their shoes off try to put them back on and talk about brands as they do (eg Nikes) Alan sits with Nick.

Alan: My brother's got some, but they're small. [Alan does up the Nick's shoelaces and goes in.]

So what do we learn about Alan here? What can he do? The tree was Alan's preferred spot at preschool (along with playing with cars and blocks on the mat). But let's follow Alan inside for the last few minutes of his preschool day.

On the mat

The Preschool Director sends children out to finish cleaning up. Alan rushes out and has a drink. Then he rushes back in. Vicki gets kids settled in a circle on the mat. Alan sits on his own near the wooden blocks. Vicki starts a clapping chant, 'We're going on a bear hunt'. Alan watches other children, but does not join in. Eventually Alan joins in the clapping, but very few other actions. He watches other children. Alan doesn't say any of the words. He fidgets with his lips. He jiggles about. He does the clicking and clapping on his knees. In fact many of the children don't seem to understand that they're meant to repeat the lines after Vicki.

Vicki: It's a bear! quick run. [Alan participates REALLY enthusiastically at this

point.]

Vicki: Just a while ago Boris [the skeleton] fell over. We're really lucky he didn't get any broken bones. What's he been eating for his bones? Cheese and milk. [Without further introduction, Vicki sings 'Dem bones' and does a series of actions. Alan does not say the words of the song, nor do the actions. Alan and Nick look at a card and chat. Vicki sees it and takes it away. Alan watches other children and Vicki occasionally but does not participate at all.

Vicki: Come on Nick and Alan, get it working. [Alan stands just out of the circle and claps for a while but not in time. He looks upset.] Can we have some space for Alan to join in now.

Alan appears very relaxed and at home whilst outside. He shows great confidence there and on the swing. He is agile and, as his mother had mentioned, very well coordinated. In the absence of his two usual friends, he has little difficulty teaming with Nick and they happily fall into an imaginative narrative, where they move from being koalas, to monkeys to spacemen. As on this occasion, Alan frequently spent lengthy periods of time in the tree. Outside, his physical and social competence seems assured. While occasionally his choice of words, such as 'idiots', draws attention, usually he is able to play undisturbed.

However inside on the mat, Alan appears uncertain. Rather than an active, self-directed participant, he becomes an observer and when he does join in, he does so hesitantly. This is particularly the case in activities which involved some form of recital (or singing) and action together. Sometimes at 'mat time', during language related public events, he engaged in what was seen as misbehaviour . For instance on one occasion, he sabotaged a song by saying different words out of time and inciting Paul and Mark to do the same. However on most occasions he simply 'sat' through it, often appearing totally removed from what was happening around him.

Alan's preschool offered a wide variety of activities. However, when left to his own choice Alan typically chose two major forms of play, outside physical activity or inside play with the cars and blocks. He chose to play with other boys with whom he enjoyed considerable status and who allowed him to direct events. Much of Alan's play involved imaginative scenarios and associated verbalisations. His favourite place appeared to be the tree where he was able to play unobserved and uninterrupted, and where he could also use his physical abilities to greatest effect. The degree of concentration and extended verbalisation demonstrated on these occasions was not in evidence in the more formal 'mat time' and invitations from

teachers rarely elicited more than the bluntest of answers.

Children's different take up of preschool curricula and pedagogies raise some important questions:

- What different opportunities for literacy learning are available to different children?
- How do children's participative repertoires (and preferred ways of interacting) make a difference to what they elicit, access and take up in school?
- How do the enactments of (gendered, racialised, classed, sexed) literate practices enable some children to 'cash in' their knowledges and skills at school and others not?
- What kinds of child 'cultural capital' and 'habitus' count in different early childhood environments (yard, school, classroom)?

These questions may be more productively considered by considering instances of pedagogical and curriculum practices, but they are usefully raised here in relation to two children who are just about to embark on their school careers. We can see already the differences in how they are able to make use of what the preschool - the transitional institution par excellence - makes available. Before following Tessa and Alan into the first year of their school (a journey which will necessarily be brief and truncated and suggestive rather than conclusive) I discuss how some teachers are taking account of the differences in children's cultural, social, linguistic and economic capital in designing early literacy curricula and pedagogies.

Working with children's linguistic and cultural resources and practices

A most important and enduring puzzle for many early years teachers involves reconceptualising social justice in education, particularly in these times when there are increasing gaps between the rich and the poor in Australia and increasing chances of longterm un- and under-employment, . Further, the extent to which classroom practices are socially just is decided in a moment by moment fashion in everyday institutional practices. For these reasons I believe it is important to look at what goes on in different classrooms in situated literacy lessons. Here I consider the practices of a number of early childhood educators, who have in common a commitment to making their literacy classrooms sites of pleasure, power and learning, by making what counts congruent with the resources and practices children bring to school. This is important work in an era where the imposition of literacy benchmarks has become strategic political collateral.

'Starting from where children are at', using 'what children bring', building on children's strengths' have been key slogans of early childhood education discourses, but what does this mean in socially diverse and poor school communities? What might count as powerful and pleasurable forms of literacy which take up what children bring and add to it in significant ways. Here I explore just three ways (and these are by no means comprehensive or discreet) in which teachers are working with these challenges. I consider the use of 'everyday texts', 'everyday problems' and 'popular culture' as the objects of study and text production in early childhood classrooms.

Everyday texts

Everyday texts may include the signs, packages, junk mail, fliers and so on that saturate the environment on screens, billboards, buses, in letterboxes, workplaces, shopping centre and homes. Early childhood teachers have long been experts in using environmental print, old magazines and packages. However I'm advocating here is more than its use as productive recycling, roleplay or craft material. Let me survey the potential of everyday texts briefly as this work is well documented elsewhere (Luke, O'Brien & Comber 1994). Sue Mahony is an early childhood teacher in South Australia. Several years ago Sue began deconstructing the gendered nature of toy advertisements on television and in catalogues with her children. While not denying the obvious pleasure children got from toys nor their associated marketing, Mahony engaged the children in repeated readings and viewings of these texts in order to explore how these texts worked to construct the desires and limits of pleasure and activity for boys and girls. Sue has gone on to write about this work for other teachers and is producing an enlarged texts for other teachers to use (Mahony et al. in preparation, 1997). In a draft copy of this text her invitations to children include the following:

Before you buy a toy, you could think about:

- How strong the toy is and therefore how long it is likely to last?

- Does the toy comes with instructions or safety information?

- What sort of play does the toy encourage?

-What sort of space you need?

- What do you learn about being a boy/girl when playing with video games?

- How are most problems solved in video games?

- What words and pictures is the advertiser using to influence you to buy the product?

Choose wisely and have fun! (Mahony et al. in preparation, 1997)

The critical potential of this work is clear, but here I want to make several additional observations. In making toys and their associated marketing the object of study, Mahony is clearly working towards a goal that children learn to be critical consumers and that they question the limited identity formations presented. However she is also making important something the children know a lot about: toys, the desire for toys, the use of toys, gendered divisions of play. This is high status material amongst four to eight yearolds. Knowledge of (not to mention ownership of) 'in' toys, their names and their features counts as significant cultural capital amongst children's peer groups. Rather than banning toys from the classroom or consigning their appearance to morning talks, by making toys and their marketing the object of study, it is valorised as significant and worthy of consideration. However it is important not to assume that Mahony's intent here is 'corrective'. While her questions make available to children what might be different ways of thinking about toys and their advertising, this is also pleasurable work.

In the context of 're-reading' the toy catalogues and advertisements, children have fun; a space becomes available in the official world of school for children to talk about their knowledge and experience. It is important to make this clear as often early childhood educators are rightly sceptical of 'critical literacy' as forms of training in political correctness. While Mahony's questions do offer children new resources for considering their experiences they do not discount children's experience of pleasure.

Mahony's work is part of a growing corpus of classroom research in the early years in South Australia where educators have applied feminist theory or anti-sexist curriculum principles to the early childhood classroom (Comber & Simpson 1995; Kavanagh 1997; O'Brien 1994). In the case of Mahony's work the topic of the texts, toys, is clearly relevant to young children. However the scope for the use of such texts it seems is limited only by teachers' imaginations. Marg Wells and her colleagues studied the wrappings and instructions on Kinder Surprise Chocolates (Collins et al. 1997) and the information tags on trees; Jenny O'Brien investigated cultural events, such as Mothers' and Father's Days; other teachers have explored the texts of food packaging such as cereal boxes, chip packets and so on (Simpson & Comber 1995). Teachers have found that this material is highly interesting to young

children - not surprising given that millions of dollars are spent on designing, constructing and distributing these everyday texts.

For these reasons in our ongoing study of literacy experiences in the prior to school and first year of schooling (where we met Tessa and Alan) the research team decided to design two assessment tasks which were built around similar everyday texts, including photographs of environmental print (including Shell and BP, McDonalds, Doritos, and so on) and a Toys R Us Christmas catalogue. This decision was informed by the work of Bob Connell (Connell 1993) who argues that equity-based assessment should start from the point of view of the most disadvantaged. We were determined that as part of an extensive repertoire of assessments tasks that all children in the study would find some texts they could engage with in meaningful and pleasurable ways and which would tell us important information about what they could do with particular forms of texts (albeit in a testing context).

A key principle in using texts which may be familiar to children as part of everyday life is that they may be more powerfully positioned to usefully approach it. In other words the text itself was less likely to be a foreign object. Our hope was that these texts as symbolic objects would unleash memories of familiar social enacted practices.

Everyday Problems

Another way of using children's resources and funds of knowledge is to engage them in dealing with everyday school and community problems. Here I briefly discuss the work of two teachers, Vivian Vasquez and Marg Wells. Vasquez is an early childhood teacher in suburban Toronto in a highly multi-cultural Catholic school. The objects of discussion, reading and writing in Vasquez's room were produced from everyday school life (Vasquez 1994). To illustrate, on one occasion when an older class in the school had organised a restaurant for a day - a French Cafe. The problem was that the kindergarten class had not been invited. When this comes to the attention of the children, they become very upset about being excluded in this way and Vasquez asks them what they could do.

The talk for that morning consists of a discussion of options which different children contribute, complaint letters, surveys of opinions and so on. At five and six these children have already learnt that writing is one way of making one's opinions known in the institutional world of the school. At one stage the children opt for a survey of

the class and other junior classes in the school. However Vasquez challenges them, by asking what this will tell them that they don't already know and what the effects might be. Realising that the survey may not be the genre for the job the children continue to consider their options. Vasquez suggest a petition, that they summarise their opinions on the French Cafe and suggestions for change and then invite fellow students to sign.

The children have never heard of a petition, but quickly see the potential and its appropriateness for their problem and their begin to rehearse how the text might go.

On this occasion we can see the potential for early literacy learning when teachers listen to children's problems with the institutional life of schools. Vasquez was continually alert to children's complaints as a source of learning and action. She describes how children tackled issues such as changing the school LOTE from French to a community language, their difficulties with supply (relieving) teachers and being relocated into a transportable building. Often these problems were initially raised by individual children through written conversations with Vasquez, but at other times they arose in the public forum of the classroom. When this occurred Vasquez encouraged the child(ren) to make a note on a classroom wall devoted to this purpose. Vasquez had covered an entire wall with paper in order for children to document their questions and follow-up processes. Here children attached artefacts and reminder notes about academic or social matters, over the year producing what Vasquez describes as an 'audit trail' or a 'learning wall'.

The point to note here is that the curriculum was jointly negotiated by the teacher and the children and a visible record of discussions in the classroom was maintained to which teacher and children could and did refer. When children begin school their concerns are very often about the everyday: Where will I be? What can I do? What might the big kids do? Their questions are important reminders of what we as institutional beings have come to take for granted as non-negotiable. Vasquez worked with these questions and concerns and in the process inducted children into powerful literate and language practices for getting things done in the world.

In a similar way but worlds apart, Marg Wells works with her grade two/three class in suburban Adelaide. As part of a literacy and social power focus within the school, teachers surveyed the children in their classes about how they wanted the world to be, the kinds of things that made them happy or unhappy, what could be improved in their local area and so on (Comber et al. 1997). Wells noticed that many of the children mentioned the poor condition of trees and parks in their local area. Following their lead she copied a street map of the area immediately surrounding the

school and armed with their maps and pencils, Wells and the children walked the local streets recording the number and condition of visible trees. The children's hunch had been right. There were not many trees and of those many were in poor condition. The school was located in an area of high poverty and which had been scheduled for an urban renewal project. These children began to make explicit what it means not to live in a 'leafy suburb'.

Following their field research (which incorporated key literacy and numeracy skills) the children decided to contact the local council and those people who were in charge of the Urban Renewal Project. This involved composing faxes and letters, making phone calls and designing a survey in order to gauge community opinion.

A detailed analysis of this project is beyond the scope of this paper, but again I want to make several observations. Once again Wells took seriously children's knowledge and analyses of their world. Rather than her original questionnaire being just another artefact for the portfolio, Wells acted on the common problem identified by many of the children and she demonstrated how to find out more. The children learnt to write persuasive and tactful complaint letters in the context of a real issue which already affected them and when the Council promised to improve the number and condition of trees in the area, they learnt that their writing could affect some change.

Vasquez and Wells work with what children bring, but they do not stop there. They show children how to use new and unfamiliar literate practices to make their thinking known and attempt social change. Surely there can be no greater motivator for reading and writing than real material change in one's immediate life. Helping children enjoy the payoffs for literate work is crucial as many children may not have access to demonstrations of these forms of social action in their communities and homes.

Popular culture

As we have seen teachers and children can engage meaningfully in serious business with literacy from the start of school. Working with children's knowledges and preoccupations result in powerful and pleasurable learning for teachers and children. A further site of expertise for many children is popular culture - from television, to Nintendo, to videos to movies. Often these forms of knowledge and practices are excluded from school. While they may be powerful determinants of the social life of the classroom, playground and who visits who after school, often the popular is excluded from school and seen as inappropriate, violent, commercial, harmful and so

on (see Walkerdine 1997 for a discussion of the classed nature of professed attitudes to popular culture).

The moral panics associated with popular culture have not surprisingly made teachers wary of its use. And when it has been brought into the world of the school it has been in the name of education or with a corrective intent (Kavanagh 1997; O'Brien 1997). Jennifer O'Brien notes for example how in the National English Statement and Profile popular literature is recognised as a valid form of texts for classroom use, but that it is usually paired with the 'critical'. O'Brien suggests that by implication the inclusion of the popular is provisional and contingent on its being properly critiqued.

One of the most inspiring accounts of teachers using the world of popular culture as a bridge to the official worlds of school literacy is that of Anne Haas Dyson (Dyson 1993). Herself a former early childhood teacher, Dyson has documented the ways in which children's knowledge of popular culture can be a powerful resource in appropriating school literate practices if it is allowed and worked on in the classroom.

Focussing on an event she names Author's Chair, Dyson takes us into the social worlds of children writing and acting at school. When in the Author's Chair, the children become script writers and directors for their peers who enact their assigned roles. Dyson dramatically narrates how children drawing on their knowledge of screen heroes, such a X-Men, Ninjas and Power Rangers, write and enact complex scripts about relations of power. Rather than having their knowledge of popular culture excluded as potentially dangerous, their teacher encourages the children to work with, on and against it, but all the while seeing its potential as both powerful and pleasurable.

A number of local educators have been inspired by the work of Anne Dyson and her cooperating teachers and are beginning to explore the ways in which popular culture may become a resource in the literacy classroom (see for example Collins et al. 1997; Kavanagh 1997). Much of this work is in its early stages, but one observation made by teachers is how they have been staggered by just how much children know - about language use, how it works and how to compose - when they allow children to work with the knowledges and practices they acquire from popular culture. As Kavanagh points out rather than presenting as passive dupes subjected to a media culture, children often prove to be highly sophisticated analysts of the screen and its associated paraphernalia, such as toys, games and so on.

The educators upon whose work I have drawn here have some things in common. They build their curriculum and research around manifest respect for children's funds of knowledge; they include children's existing textual practices as valid classroom repertoires; they take seriously children's analyses of everyday life in and out of school; they attend to and respond to the content of children's spoken and written texts; and they use their knowledge of how language works to assist children with writing, reading and speaking as powerful social practices.

'Coming, ready or not!'

And to conclude I return to my title. It is deliberately ambiguous and it is to that ambiguity to which I now turn. Children arrive at school 'more or less' ready for what awaits them. Schools and their teachers are similarly 'more or less' ready for the children who inhabit them. Schools are indeed, like most institutions, very strange places indeed. They organise time, space, resources, bodies, talk, social interaction, food and literate practices in which are institutionally specific and alien to the logic of everyday home and community living.

The old puzzle for which new approaches are needed is: how to reconceptualise the early years of schooling in order to increase the productive connections between teachers and children so that socio-cultural differences are not constituted as deficits. This requires new forms of knowledge and ethical practices on the parts of educators. Sometimes teachers discount children's preschool, home and community experiences as limited, non-existent or as chaotic (see Comber 1997 and Freebody & Welch 1993). Teachers need to learn about how children live in homes and communities - the complexity of networks which support families with minimal economic resources, their sophisticated multilingual and/or multi-modal language use and production, their multiple responsibilities for siblings and elders, the independent negotiation of service encounters, their encyclopaedic knowledge of television and popular culture and so on.

So to return very briefly to Tessa and Alan. The good news is that according to the research team's assessments of literacy development, both Tessa and Alan had improved. They could correctly identify more letters and numbers. Alan was able score on tasks which he had previously refused to tackle. He showed signs of understanding how to role-play reading on predictable texts. However as the assessor explained good news is relative:

The Tell Me task required the child to listen to a story, answer three comprehension questions, then retell the story to a friend using the book as support. This was probably the only task that Alan didn't give the impression that he couldn't wait to get away. Alan appeared to enjoy listening to the story and quite happy to retell the story to his friend Paul. However, as he neared the end of his retelling, he got up and left, saying 'the end'.

Our classroom observations and the testing regime indicated that school literacy activities appear to cause Alan extreme physical discomfort and to put it bluntly he typically avoided what he could, especially events which involved public display. 'Mat time' continues to find Alan wriggling his way around the room and rarely attending to the explicit literacy teaching on offer. On occasion the teacher and researcher have noticed genuine interest in reading particularly when the topic relates to the natural world, such as ants, spiders or space. Alan's physical abilities stand him in good stead with his peers in the playground, but in the classroom these same peers are beginning to point out that he's 'not really reading' as he excitedly comments on the pictures of insects in the book he has chosen.

Tessa on the other hand has made according to her assessor's notes 'dramatic improvement' across all literacy tasks. During a recent visit to her classroom Tessa leaned across the table where I was writing and stated that she knew where I had written her name. She then pointed out (reading upside down) all instances of her name identified in my messy scrawl. Another day as the class undertook work on the importance of respect for diverse cultures, Tessa returned to her desk drew a picture of herself and her grandmother together and wrote 'Grandma' in Greek in the accompanying speech bubble. Tessa's funds of knowledge, participative repertoires and linguistic and cultural capital have all been of use to her in her first months of school. It would appear that school is made for her and that she is made for school. But her connections serve to throw into sharp relief the many disconnections experiences by her peers.

There are no easy lessons to be learned from this brief voyages into early childhood classrooms. Teaching always involves evaluations of what counts as valued performance and knowledge. Designing curriculum is about making some things more important than others, including some cultural practices and excluding others. Many early childhood educators believe that traditions of play and activity based curricula are now under threat with moves to early intervention and literacy benchmarks.

for in early childhood classrooms and as we make those decisions we need to consider the children who most need what schools have to offer. If we continue to privilege only knowledge of mainstream literate practices then we continue to ensure that some children come to school 'ready or not'. It is my argument that teachers make ready for different children, to respect, appreciate and work with what they know, and to be ready to offer complex and sophisticated literate practices, through which children can achieve things in their immediate and future worlds.

References

Baker, C. & Freebody, P. 1993, ' The crediting of literate competence in classroom talk,' The Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, vol.16, no.4, pp.279-94.

Bourdieu, P. 1991, Language and Symbolic Power, edit. J. B. Thompson, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Bourdieu, P. & Passeron, J. 1990, Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture, second edition, London: Sage Publications.

Collins, A., Wells, M., & Jordan, J. 1997, Texts on television, Case studies at Ferryden Park Primary School, Adelaide: Department for Education and Children's Services, South Australia.

Comber, B. 1997, 'The problem of 'background' in researching the student subject', Australian Association for Educational Research National Annual Conference, Brisbane, November 30- December 4, 1997.

Comber, B., Badger, L., Nixon, H., & Pitt, J. 1997, 'Socio-economically disadvantaged students and the acquisition of school literacies: Pilot study,' University of South Australia, report in two vols to the Department of Education and Children's Services, South Australia.

Cormack, P. & Comber, B. 1996, 'Writing the teacher: The South Australian junior primary English teacher 1962-1995', Phil Cormack & Barbara Comber, in C. Beavis & B. Green (Eds.) Teaching the English Subjects: (Dis)continuities in Curriculum History and English Teaching in Australia, Geelong: Deakin University Press.

Comber, B. & Simpson, A. 1995, 'Reading cereal boxes', Broadsheet, Texts: The heart of the English Curriculum, Adelaide: Department for Education and Children's Services, South Australia.

Connell, R. W. 1993, Schools and Social Justice, Our Schools/Our Selves, Education Foundation, Toronto.

Dyson, A.H. 1993, Social Worlds of Children Learning to Write in an Urban Primary School, New York: Teachers College Press.

Freebody, P. & Welch, A. 1993, ' Individualization and domestication in current literacy debates in Australia', in Knowledge and Power: International Perspectives on Literacy as Policy and Practice, eds. P. Freebody & A. Welch, London: The Falmer Press.

Hill, S., Comber, B., Louden, B., Rivalland, J., & Reid, J. in preparation, 'Connections between literacy development n the prior to school period and the first year of schooling', National Children Literacy Project, DEETYA.

Kavanagh, K. 1997, Texts on television: School literacies through viewing in the first years of school, Adelaide: Department for Education and Children's Services, South Australia.

Luke, A., O'Brien, J. & Comber, B. 1994, 'Making community texts objects of study, "Australian Journal of Language and Literacy, 17(2):139-149.

Mahony, S., Comber, B. & Badger, L. in preparation, 1997, A consumer guide to toys, Adelaide: ERA Publications and Martin International.

O'Brien, J. 1997, 'The 'critical' and the 'popular' in current English curriculum documents', Australian Association for Research in Education Annual National Conference, Brisbane, November 30- December 4, 1997.

O'Brien, J. 1994, 'Show Mum you love her: Taking a new look at junk mail', Reading, vol. 28, no. 1, pp.43-46.

Smart, B. 1983, Foucault, Marxism and Critique, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.

Tyler, D. 1993, 'Making better children', in Child and Citizen: genealogies of schooling and subjectivity, eds. D. Meredyth & D. Tyler, Institute of Cultural Studies, Griffith University.

Vasquez, V. 1994, 'A step in the dance of critical literacy', Reading, vol. 28, no. 1, pp. 39-43.

Walkerdine, V. 1997, Daddy's Girl: Young girls and popular culture, Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press.

Walkerdine, V. 1984, 'Developmental psychology and the child-centred pedagogy: The insertion of Piaget into early education', in Changing the Subject: Psychology, Social Regulation and Subjectivity, J. Henriques, W. Hollway, C. Urwin, C. Venn & V. Walkerdine, London: Methuen.